

The Convert

Francis B. Nyanmjoh



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THE CONVERT

A Two-Act Play by
Francis B. Nyamnjoh

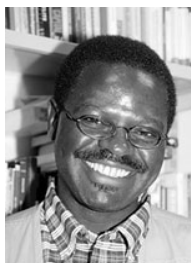


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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



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The Convert: Introduction

This play tackles the theatrically attractive but ethically complex issue of Christian fundamentalism. Nyamnjoh, as a sociologist is well qualified to explore the social problems and psychological pressures which give rise to the born-again phenomenon, and the strong appeal of fundamentalist religion. *The Convert*, however is no schematic sociological tract. It deals with the conflicting imperatives in 21st century Africa, which push ordinary people into extraordinary situations, and provides no easy solutions to the issues raised.

Although the play revolves around the Ultimate Church of Christ and the four main characters affected by it, the audience is given a deftly sketched picture of a corrupt world beyond it, lacking in spiritual or community values. We see the corruption in the hopeless task Charity has tracing her *avance de solde*, “chasing files in an ocean of shacks in the Ministry of Money”. It is also hinted at in the difficulty Damien faces trying to climb the educational ladder, seeking “spillovers of sexually transmitted marks”. More widely, we feel the anomie which haunts the lives of young people, so many of whom are totally disillusioned with life that police have to guard the city lake from suicide attempts.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that young people like Charity, and eventually Peter, find a sense of solidarity, self-esteem and community identity in the fellowship of born-again Christianity. Nyamnjoh presents this process in a subtle manner. The characterisation, for

example is remarkable for its avoidance of any obvious protagonist; the audience is allowed no clear character with whom to identify. The four main characters, Pastor, Damien, Charity and Peter have both virtues and flaws, each providing insights into ways the consumer-oriented materialism of modern life impacts upon African spirituality and community values.

In some ways, the African American type Pastor is the simplest character. He is a hypocritical preacher, who uses a charismatic hold over his flock to enrich himself. Peter says of him, "The Pastor has turned God into a trickster, that preys on innocence and naivety". Nyamnjoh adds complexity to this character, however, by showing the Pastor in Act II scene 3 having conscience-driven nightmares.

Damien is hypocritical in another way. He hides his cold-hearted, sensual attitude behind a mask of cheerful sympathy, with enough success to seduce Charity. But he too is haunted by a guilty conscience in the form of a voice. Nevertheless, in the final act of running away from Charity's death at the hands of an abortionist, Damien ignores that voice of conscience. At the moment when the audience is beginning to identify with Damien, the author dampens the empathy, and switches attention to Peter.

Charity is a young woman who, as she explains in her eloquent, public testimony to the church congregation, has repudiated her addiction to material goods and to what the Pastor calls "illicit caresses, thirsty kisses". Although she is now a fervent, born-again Christian, the audience is always aware that there is a danger of her backsliding under the influence of her specious admirer, Damien. Nyamnjoh

never mentions the word AIDS in the dialogue, but its presence haunts the play, and Charity's clinging to the simple morality of the Ultimate Church of Christ, shows one way in which young people can attempt to make sense of that scourge. Her failure to survive the battle between abstinence and hormonal instincts, gives her death at the hands of the abortionist a pathetic quality.

Peter is the "convert" of the title, but in some ways is the most difficult character to understand. His fanatical opposition to the Ultimate Church of Christ provides a useful mouthpiece for the author's condemnation of the Pastor's hypocrisy. Yet Peter's abrupt conversion to born-again Christianity at the end, soaked as it is in dramatic irony, does not seem too far-fetched, given the emotional stress caused by the sudden death of his friend and kinswoman, Charity. As the traditional bonds of kinship begin to unravel in 21st century Africa, the meta-communities of fundamentalist religion, however artificial and shallow they may be, appear to offer some form of moral certainty, to youths thirsty for guidance.

The Convert has an interesting theatrical style. In the early scenes and in the abortion scene near the end, the style is realistic and the dialogue accurately reflects the clash between the religious jargon of the church members and the secular, slick, sometimes bombastic register of educated, ambitious young men like Damien and Peter. In Act II scenes 2 and 3, however, Damien's voice of conscience and the Pastor's nightmare visions offer a more stylised dramatic technique and set of registers, which allow the author to hint at the deep spiritual needs lying below the surface of society's materialistic preoccupations.

The conclusion of the play presents no easy resolution to the ambiguities raised in the earlier scenes. At the level of plot there are unanswered questions. Does Damien get away with the manslaughter of Charity? Is the guilt from that crisis transferred to the Pastor? Even if the Pastor escapes that false charge, are his crimes of extortion revealed? Is Peter's conversion permanent and genuine, or simply a temporary attack of escapist piety? Does the Ultimate Church of Christ recover from the pastor's sudden disappearance?

The open-ended denouement also affects the themes. Nyamnjoh seems to condemn the hypocrisy of the Pastor and the naivety of his followers, while offering a compassionate understanding of the social and psychological pressures, which drive young men and women into the arms of fundamentalist Christianity. The audience is left to ponder these complex issues, with greater insight, but with no pat solution to the problems raised.

David Kerr

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CHARACTERS

PASTOR		<i>Born Again</i> preacher
CHORUS		<i>Born Again</i> congregation
CHARITY		<i>Born Again</i> Christian
DAMIEN		University Student
PETER		Charity's cousin, Damien's neighbour
PAUL		Medical student, Damien's friend
THE VOICE		Damien's Conscience
ELDER		Senior member of Chorus

ACT ONE SCENE I

It is afternoon. Men, women and children are assembled in a big hall in the heart of the city of Nkwagh; they form a large gathering and are seated on benches. They talk, sing, clap, dance, read and pray; and are collectively known as the Chorus. There is a Pastor standing behind a pulpit on which hangs a giant wooden cross. He directs the proceedings.

PASTOR

In the past we've lived with the Prince of Darkness, posing as henchmen for Death; but now: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia! Behold here comes the Prince of Light to free us from damnation, to guide and guard posterity, and to pave the way to everlasting salvation.

CHORUS

Let's sing and praise the Lord our God; let's clean His House and light a fire; let's bring home the rain-soaked flock. [*They sing*] "What a great story, a great story. Man to leave the world and follow Christ..."

PASTOR

The devil is in our midst: Behind our houses he lurks, he sleeps with us in bed, in hotels and chicken-parlours along with our wayward husbands, he dissipates the fruit of conjugal sweat. Do we fold our arms to watch him ruin our homes, mislead the young, kill our consciences, and destroy the Temple of God?

CHORUS

Let's purge our souls and clean our feet; let's bear the cross to Calvary; let's in Christ be born again. *(They sing)* "We are born again ... Holy Ghost we are born again."

PASTOR

Sing his praises, sing his praises, sing the praises of Christ the King. Open up your hearts and receive him that Judas slew for thirty rusty coins centuries ago.

CHORUS

Let's praise the Lord all day long; let's sing and drum and dance to show our joy; let's proclaim we're Born Again. *(They sing)* "Standing on the rock ... Jesus is the rock."

PASTOR

The joy to be born again is great; Christ is God's invaluable gift to mankind. He's the salt we need to live. Let's find him and own him and share him. Let's be born in him. *(Intones a song)* "Aaaaaallelu, Aaaaaallelu, Alleluuuuia..."

CHORUS

[Singing] Sing Alleluia, sing Alleluia, sing Alleluia. Jesus Christ has conquered Satan. Sing Alleluia, sing Alleluia, sing Alleluia.

[The Pastor repeats the intonation and the Chorus sings the song again]

PASTOR

[Intones another song] "I am your child (servant, friend)..."

CHORUS

[*Singing*] Yes my Lord, yes my Lord; I am your child. Yes my Lord, yes my Lord; I am your child. Oh yes my Father; I am your child.

PASTOR

Yes, we're all his children, servants and friends. But in the past we've been blind; blind to his grace, love and care; blind to the sins that fetter us, and blind to the torments of hell. We must go back to Jesus, the unique Light of the world, and the only way to God. Let's proclaim our faith.

CHORUS

We believe in Christ the Saviour, whom sin tried in vain to conquer, whom some congregations defame, who is meek, kind and cognizant, and whom we have truly received. We believe the world to be sinful, to belong to Satan and his men, and to be harmful to us - True Believers in Christ. We believe in the humble mission to spread the Word of God with confidence and boldness, without fear and shame. Amen.

PASTOR

[*Taking up his Bible*] Open your Bibles to Matthew 7:7-8 and follow as I read the Word of God. [*Reads out aloud*] *Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened [KJV].* This is the word of the Lord.

CHORUS

Amen. [*Closing their Bibles and looking up*] Praise the Lord. Alleluia. [*Singing*] "Jara oh ... Jara oh ... Na Jara..."

PASTOR

Ponder over the scripture and pray to the Lord that you may understand it.

CHORUS

We thank you Lord, we thank you Jehovah Almighty.

PASTOR

Listen to what He has to say through me, his chosen and humble servant.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Jesus is champion, the only champion.

PASTOR

[*Stays silent for a few minutes as he mops his face with a white handkerchief*] Do you realise that these words represent the greatest promise ever made to man?

CHORUS

Praise the Lord.

PASTOR

Imagine a world of boundless possibilities; a world where justice, love, peace and tolerance abound. A world where vice and evil have no place. A world wherein total freedom resides; where it suffices to ask, seek or knock. Imagine a

world without prejudice; where one might question without fear of being swallowed up by the bores of repression.

CHORUS

Alleluia. God has made an open door, which no man can shut. Alleluia.

PASTOR

Imagine a world that encourages individual initiative; where tradition is not such a tyrant. Imagine a world at last where human effort is rewarded; where individuals have what they merit and merit what they have.

CHORUS

Alleluia. What a world! What prospects!

PASTOR

You don't have to use your eyes to know that such a world is yet to come. Yet the Bible tells us it's possible. And the Bible lies not.

CHORUS

The Great Book. Praise the Lord.

PASTOR

Paradise is obtainable right here on earth! But how many of us are prepared to ask, seek or knock for it?

CHORUS

How many?

PASTOR

How many of us are willing to allow those we hold under the yoke of domestic, state or religious tyranny to ask, seek or knock?

CHORUS

How many?

PASTOR

We not only hate to see others free and happy, but we ourselves are more than willing prisoners of earthly lust and diabolic appetites. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is not to you that I address these words. I do not doubt a single bit when you say you are born again in Christ.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Big God. Praise He who is standing by your side.

PASTOR

You have received Him and He now dwells in you. He is in you and you are in him. Hence whatsoever you ask and seek, and wherever you knock, do so with the confidence of the chosen few. Be proud as an artery of the Sacred Heart of Christ.

CHORUS

In Jesus name we are proud. The name of Jesus is powerful.

PASTOR

Let the world be nourished by the Holy Blood that flows in your veins. But do not forget to let the sunshine as well on those sitting; that unfortunate lot who risk losing their souls as they have lost their bodies, should we fail to heed their call.

CHORUS

We shall spread the Word like fire fuelled by the robber tree.

PASTOR

Spread the message, brothers and sisters, that others may receive Christ just as we have. And so, as we go home tonight, let's each pledge to bring back at least one disciple of the devil, so that together we can work to deliver them from the jaws of sin.

CHORUS

From the hungry jaws of sin we pledge to free the world.

PASTOR

To our brothers and sisters who feel tormented by the devil and its pawns, may I remind them of our healing and deliverance session on Tuesday, usual place and time.

CHORUS

We are in a spiritual warfare against Satan and his forces. And with Jesus the light of life fighting alongside us, we shall not stammer.

PASTOR

Let us close with a song and prayer. [*Intones a song*] "Born again, Born again, Born again..."

CHORUS

[*Sing with life and vigour*] You must be born again, you must be born again; with the water and the spirit. We say onto you, you must be born again.

PASTOR

That is joyous, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Now let's pray: O Lord, O God, O heavenly Father, we thank thee for thy love, kindness and mercy. Bless us and grant us the power to continue to do thy work here on earth. Forgive our brothers and sisters who are still living in sin; they do not know what they do. Help them realise the importance of being born again; to understand that we are not proud in vain, but that our pride comes from assured salvation. Lord help them understand that nothing is as sweet as living with and in Christ; and that they can never succeed in dissuading us, as Satan so wants them to; for Christ our Master remains our Shield. Alleluia. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

CHORUS

Amen. Praise the Lord. Alleluia. Praise the Lord. Alleluia. For Jesus conquers Satan, Alleluia. Praise the Lord. [*Singing "Great Change" by Sonny Okosuns*]

[CURTAIN]

ACT ONE SCENE II

It is in the early hours of the afternoon. Charity is alone in Peter's apartment. She is knitting and singing songs of faith.

CHARITY

[*Singing as she knits*] Yes, I believe; Yes, I believe; Yes, I believe; Jesus died for me. Open, open, open are the gates of Heaven. Open, open, open is the heart of Jesus. Let's flood in one and all; let's flood in and be saved by the spilt blood of the sacred Lamb.

[There is a knock at the door. Charity interrupts her singing and knitting, and goes to answer it. In comes Damien]

DAMIEN

Good afternoon Charity.

CHARITY

Good afternoon brother.

DAMIEN

[*Smiling*] You always mistake me for your brother. Do I resemble Peter that much?

CHARITY

No, but you are my brother in Christ. Whereas Peter is only a biological brother.

DAMIEN

But who is more a brother?

CHARITY

The one in Christ, of course; which is why I wish you were one such brother to me.

DAMIEN

Has Peter gone back to work already?

CHARITY

Yes.... To what denomination do you belong?

DAMIEN

Catholic.

CHARITY

No doubt. I can smell a catholic from a thousand miles [*smiles*]. When will you receive Christ, Damien? Tell me in earnest. It isn't too late yet; you can still be saved. But you must hurry. When will you be born again in the Lord? Please, say when, for time is fast running out.

DAMIEN

What do you mean? [*smiling*] Don't you know that I'm baptised? Where do you think I got the name Damien from?

CHARITY

No, what I mean is to be truly born again.

DAMIEN

How many baptisms are needed to qualify me for that?

CHARITY

You don't understand, Damien. You may be baptised, yet not be born again. You may belong to the Catholic Church, but you are not a true believer. These issues are complex and quite annoying at times; but you must understand them if you desire true salvation.

DAMIEN

[*Feigning seriousness*] You seem to be particularly particular about truly true issues, aren't you? Can you truly tell me if Peter is very truly going to be in tonight? I most truly want to see him.

CHARITY

Do understand me Damien. You must not think that I jest when I talk to you about this issue of crucial importance. Do be serious please. I love you very much.

DAMIEN

[*Delightfully surprised*] Really? [*Then with presumptuous seriousness*] I am pleased to hear that Charity, from your own mouth. I can confess to you that since you arrived from Kamnogo several days back, I've scarcely had a night's sleep; my thoughts are all about of you. I have sweet mental pictures of you every time, everywhere. Even when I am reading, it's you I see bouncing between the lines.

How pleasant for you to confirm my dreams. And just like that! God in Heaven doesn't sleep! He is truly great! Rest assured, my dear, that you love a man who will spare no experience to give you pleasure.

CHARITY

Stop that please! Stop sinning so! Don't you know I'm God's anointed? Why do you assault my ears with evil? Why are you so immoral, so dirty, and so filthy? Why do you delight in offending Christ the Saviour with matters of the flesh? Can't you see I love you like a brother? Can't you be as good as you look?

DAMIEN

Look? Do I actually look good Charity? You are mistaken; I disbelieve a sinner can look good. Of what use to God is a handsome sinner; why should God even create such an individual? No, Charity, the more realistic thing to say is that I am conveniently as ugly as my sins. Which is as well as saying that my mission in life suits my fatal personality.

CHARITY

I'm sorry I can't reciprocate the strong feelings you have for me; but I invite you all the same to come along with me tomorrow afternoon to the Ultimate Church of Christ. I'm sure you'll love what you see and hear there, and perhaps opt to join us in our fight against sin and pleasures of the flesh. And then we'll cease to belong to opposing camps.

DAMIEN

I don't think going there is any use Charity. Right now it's you I cherish, the Ultimate Church of Christ can wait. What do you mean, opposing camps? If you can oppose two Christian churches, then you must be capable of destroying Peter, the Rock on which the Church is founded. And to destroy the Rock means to destroy the House of God, thus to render Christ homeless. Would you claim you truly love a king whose palace you burn down, driving asunder the queen, the princesses and the princes?

CHARITY

You must be a very good debater Damien. But admit that to excel in debate, you should be versed with your subject matter. So how can you decide whether or not we belong to opposing camps unless you experience the situation both ways? On the other hand, I can speak of opposing camps because I have had to do with both the Catholic Church of Rome and the Ultimate Church of Christ. In fact, Damien, if you want to attain true knowledge, you must be ready to do as recommended in Matthew 7:7 [*she opens her Bible*]: *Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you* [KJV].

DAMIEN

I only hope that those concerned would answer when I ask, give when I seek, and open when I knock. For countless are the times I have asked but not received, sought but not found, and knocked but not been allowed in. Perhaps you may say I have done none of these truly. But just now I truly asked, sought and knocked at the door of your heart,

in vain. Do you think that all one really needs do is ask, seek and knock?

CHARITY

Damien, it is truly difficult to argue with you. I am very tired at the moment, unfortunately, having spent the whole morning chasing files in an ocean of shacks at the Ministry of Money. I badly need a rest now. I'm hungry too, but I can cook later. So if you would kindly postpone our discussion for later, tomorrow after the church service perhaps, I'll be obliged.

DAMIEN

I have some food at my place. If you like, you can come and have some of it before your rest.

CHARITY

That is very kind of you.

DAMIEN

Is it equally strange of me, the devil's truncheon?

CHARITY

Who said you were the devil's truncheon?

DAMIEN

Or rather, who should say so?

[They both laugh and go out]

[CURTAIN]

ACT ONE SCENE III

Once more members of the Ultimate Church of Christ have congregated in their hall of worship. With them are many new people who have come to be born again or simply to satisfy their curiosity. Those to be born again are vomiting their transgressions and dedicating themselves to Jesus. There is the Pastor and the Chorus. Also present are Charity (dressed completely in white) and Damien. During the Altar Call some come forward and confess their sins. With every song, there is spontaneous dancing and clapping of hands in accompaniment.

PASTOR

We have heard sad stories of hell; our sinful brothers and sisters have confessed their world is the devil's lair. Let's beseech Christ's intercession. Let's bar for them the gates of hell and lead them up the narrow path; that they may benefit from the salvation that is ours.

CHORUS

The way to hell is broad and tarred; to it's right is the narrow path - rough with stones and tough to climb. Let's be governed by our faith. Let's kill the desires of the flesh. Let's be well and truly born again. [Singing] "I have a reason to praise the Lord..."

PASTOR

It's truly, truly sad to think how deep in evil they've sunk; using Christ to promote Satan. Which is a hideous crime

sponsored by churches we know only too well; churches that claim to be as old as our Saviour. Join us to smile in triumph like Christ who bravely conquered Satan as did David to Goliath.

CHORUS

Let's fight on, as did David; let's swing his sling to bring down the Anti-Christ's who blaspheme our Lord in public and in private.

PASTOR

The mass defections say it all, that the flock has found in us the true torchbearers of eternal life. We must not relent the fight to oust evil and crush its life essence.

CHORUS

Let's keep our doors open; for day and night in thousands they come to ask, seek and knock; that from evil we may deliver their souls - souls for long imprisoned by churches that claim to be of Christ.

PASTOR

We've heard them confess one and all; they've renounced Satan without fear and have promised to heed God's call. Does one of us have any testimony to make that shows we were sinners just as well, long before we discovered Christ and the joy of being born again in Him?

[Charity puts up her hand first, and the coordinator asks her to come forward and tell her tale]

CHARITY

Before I knew Christ three years back, I was the biggest sinner-girl in town.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

CHARITY

I liked MCing parties, what every girl loves doing. I cherished going out with handsome guys for pride's sake, to challenge my friends, to prove that I was tough. I was very popular, attracting pot-bellied men with big wallets and flashy cars, torturing them and then sending them back to tell the story of their disgrace by a woman of substance.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

CHARITY

I abused my flesh in every way as I thought myself queen of the world. I smoked cannabis, downed beer, took strong drinks, visited medicine men and adorned myself with charms and amulets; I bought the latest dresses in fashion and chased after men to make money. As the most famous girl in town, I drove in the latest cars - Hyundai, Pajero, BMW, Mercedes, you name them. I frequented the best chicken-parlours and sampled the thickest wallets in hotels of exceeding comfort. Nothing ever pricked my conscience that what I did was at all wrong. For I was always in time

to confess my sins on Saturday in preparation for Sunday mass, where I was a permanent and privileged communicant. For I knew the priests with some of whom I smiled deep.

CHORUS

The devil at work. What a devious creature.

CHARITY

Then, most suddenly, most unexpectedly, I began to reap what I sowed: my beauty began to wilt. I had used bleaching creams without knowing of their ugly and harmful side effects. I had hopped into bed with Tom, Dick and Harry, paying scant attention to the ills of lust. Fear took hold of me. But that was just the beginning. I failed my finals in college and my parents died of grief. My sugar daddies fled when my beauty retired. For a year or two I was drained by pain, humbled by hunger and mastered by fear. But then came a glimmer of hope from an angle I least expected.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

CHARITY

Jesus Christ offered me his bosom and tendered me the key to his heavenly mansion. I seized it with vigour and joy; for I thought I was lost, but I had been found. May the Lord be praised.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

CHARITY

Today I know better.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

CHARITY

I know that Knowing married men, mining devious wallets or fornicating with soutanes, is ba-aaaddd. Having pre-marital sex is unthink-aaable. Nature tells you this is wrrrong. To be a sex hungry youth is to offend your God. That I know thanks to Jesus.

CHORUS

Jesus is great. Praise the Lord.

CHARITY

Today I have discovered the Ultimate Church of Christ and taken my distance from peddlers of sin. I'm freed at last of the hypocrisy of the past. The church that used to be mine, I know no more. For, by condoning sin, it made Godliness look like something abstract, an illusion!

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

CHARITY

Go up to the mountains, do not remain in the plains or you'll be consumed. Praise the Lord.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Amen

CHARITY

And today I can proudly say to every tempting lecher: "Heh! Don't touch. I'm God's anointed. I'm Jesus Embassy where no devil dares. For Jesus is my champion, the only one." Praise the Lord. [*Bounces back to her seat, thumbs up*]

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord. Christ is the Prince of Light; the Generator of hope - friend to the fallen lord of Eden. Come to Jesus and be satisfied, for neither adultery nor fornication, nor polygamy can satisfy you. Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

PASTOR

[*Intones a song*] "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound..."

CHORUS

[*Sing*] Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind but now I see.

PASTOR

We were once lost, but now are found; we were once blind, but now can see. Let's stay steadfast in our faith, let's be Christ's guerrillas on earth.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord. [*Singing*] "Come to Jesus and be satisfied. Amen..."

PASTOR

Let's wage a holy war of words, let's use our wit to win the war, let's champion the cause of those the world rejects.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

PASTOR

Today's sermon is titled: *God, sex, and **man***. It is especially prepared for our new brothers and sisters.

CHORUS

May they see the light of God through your words.

PASTOR

Let's start with the following questions: Do you know that you were specially created? Do you know that your creator loves you specially? Do you know that your sexual capacity is a sign of this love? And do you know that this gift is meant to do you good and not to destroy you?

CHORUS

From sister Charity's testimony we find the answers.

PASTOR

Praise the Lord. You must be guided by the Bible which we may aptly term God's Handbook of Advice against Vice. These questions are fundamental. The way to the Lord is narrow, rough and tough. We must be wary of how we lead our lives, particularly our sex lives; for it is here that we are most tempted and most victimized.

CHORUS

May the good Lord disarm our lust and blunt our fantasies, so that recklessness finds no refuge in us.

PASTOR

There are two important questions we should always ask ourselves whenever we want to entertain a sexual relationship: is this relationship permitted and approved by God? Does it promise eternal happiness to you, others and the world? These questions would constantly remind us that God hates fornication, adultery, homosexuality and masturbation.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord.

PASTOR

We must also avoid sinful thoughts. Matthew 5:28 says it all: *Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* [NIV]

CHORUS

It doesn't become us, God's anointed, to sin in any way.

PASTOR

Avoid reading immoral books and magazines, stop watching immoral films. Wriggle not to *Soukous*, *Bikutsi*, *Kwasakwasa*, *Dombolo*, *Zengué*, *Coupé Decallé*, or *Kwaito*, nor melt in the arms of *Zouk*, no matter how tempting.

CHORUS

The devil finds easy prey in wriggling or melting souls.

PASTOR

Keep away from illicit caresses, thirsty kisses and starving bottoms.

CHORUS

In Jesus we trust. Alleluia.

PASTOR

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, kindly abstain from these vices for your own good. The Bible is very clear on the fate of those who persist in their sins. Join me to read what Revelation 21:8 says on this:

CHORUS

[*Open their Bibles and read out*] *But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators,*

sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fires and sulphur, which is the second death. [NIV]

PASTOR

None of us here wants to die again in this manner. We all want to inherit the Kingdom of God. But to be on our guard we should listen to I Corinthians 6:9-10, which reminds us with the words:

CHORUS

[Open their Bibles and read out] Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the Kingdom of God. [NIV]

PASTOR

But we should not despair; we should not tremble with fear. God is forgiving as long as we would listen to him. After all, has he not done so much for us already? Doesn't John 3:16 tell us all?

CHORUS

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. [NIV]

PASTOR

Though our new brothers and sisters have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, Christ would always answer when they ask, give when they seek, and open when they knock. Thus let's all strive to live in Christ for, as II Corinthians 5:17 says:

CHORUS

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. [NIV]

PASTOR

Stand up all, let's pray to the Almighty that he may forgive our new brothers and sisters of their sins and take them into his Kingdom.

CHORUS

[All stand and spread out their hands in prayer] Praise the Lord. Alleluia.

PASTOR

Lord God, some of us here present have sinned in our thoughts, words and deeds. We believe that Jesus died on the cross for us. We believe in him as our Saviour and Lord. Forgive our new brothers and sisters their sins and heal them of their ailments. Grant them too your fatherhood and send your Holy Spirit to live within them just as you have done for us your children. Grant us the power to follow your footsteps to eternity. We thank you for hearing our prayer and for answering it here and now. Amen.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Let's sing and praise the Lord our God, let's get mad with joy, let's rush afield and bring home the lost flocks.

PASTOR

Remember, brothers and sisters, the open gate at the end of the road through which each must go alone. And there, beyond, is a light we cannot see, our Father claims His own, finds happiness and rest.

CHORUS

There is comfort in the thought that a Loving God Knows Best.

PASTOR

[Intones a song] "There is life and joy..."

CHORUS

[Sing] There is life and joy over there... Over there... There is life and joy over there... Over there... There is life and joy over there... Over there ... Over there ... Over there.

[Tithes and offerings]

PASTOR

Now is your time to prove to God Almighty that you appreciate the good things He has done for you. Remember, as always, that your giving is an open door to

your prosperity. Keep your coins aside, and put your papers in that basket. Dip your hands right into the bottom of your pockets, and give big to the Lord who cherishes a cheerful giver. Give big, so that your effort may be used to win more souls to God the ultimate giver. [*Intones a son*] "Give, it shall come back to you..."

CHORUS

[*Sing*] "Give, Give, Give, it shall come back to you ... Give, Give, Give, it shall come back to you ... good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom ... For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again..."

[Other luring songs are sung as tithes and offerings proceed. Every now and again there is an outburst of someone speaking in tongues. There is dancing and clapping as well. An elder is appointed to say a prayer for the offerings, after which the coordinator makes a few announcements and closes the session]

ELDER

Lord God, we call upon you, to free these gifts of all evil, envy or bitterness, so that they may become harmless to our Pastor and his family whom you have elected to communion with you. In Jesus name we pray.

CHORUS

Amen. We've lit a lamp and searched our souls. Not a shred of evil, envy or bitterness in them have we found.

ELDER

Praise the Lord.

CHORUS

Amen.

PASTOR

Go home with joy and hope. Be wary and tread with care, for the devil is omnipresent. He never fails but tries again. And since we know not with the flesh, let's better avoid than overcome temptation. Live in communion with Christ till we meet again. Continue your evangelisation crusade and await reward in the world hereafter; for we are not of this world.

CHORUS

Christ will light our way; he will guide us away from evil, and will crush our enemies. He is our shield against Satan and his men.

PASTOR

[Intones a song] "Allelu, Allelu, Alleluia... "

CHORUS

[Singing] Sing Alleluia, Sing Alleluia, Sing Alleluia ...
Jesus Christ has conquered Satan... Sing Alleluia, Sing Alleluia, Sing Alleluia....

[They all go out of the hall singing]

[CURTAIN]

ACT ONE SCENE IV

It is night at Damien's one-room apartment. Charity is sitting on the only chair and looking through a photo album. Damien is sitting on the bed.

CHARITY

Brother Damien, do you appreciate the Pastor's preaching?

DAMIEN

He is incapable of nothing. His words can move mountains; he is a revolutionary. To speak truly, he bought my heart this afternoon.

CHARITY

I like that; I admire your objectivity. He is the best in the country, having received his training in the US.

DAMIEN

Sister, what music should I play for you?

[Leaves the bed and moves towards the Hifi set]

CHARITY

Any of your choice.

DAMIEN

[Puts on Marvin Gaye's Sexual Healing] How do you like that piece Sister? It is a marvellous one, isn't it Sister? It brings peace to the body, and makes the mind feel good, doesn't it?

CHARITY

Don't be so immoral brother! [*goes to switch off the music*]
Don't you have Jim Reeves?

DAMIEN

His tapes are right there among that lot in front of you. Select the one you want. I stopped playing his music the day I read in a magazine that he was such a racist, and that he never performed in a hall graced with a black face in the audience.

CHARITY

I am interested in religious music irrespective of the artist. Any tape that contains the piece with the wordings: "This world is not my home; I am just a passer-by", would do me good.

DAMIEN

Look for that then, and tell me what to get you to drink.

CHARITY

I'm drinking nothing. I want to go back to Peter's. He must be wondering where I am.

DAMIEN

The same Peter I know or a different one? Why do you pretend not to know him? Have you ever seen Peter home at this hour? Impossible! Not even when he is sick! A certified drunkard like him? No way! Even if he were at

home, which is most unlikely, he should normally think that you're still in church praising the Lord.

CHARITY

Okay, I'll stay, but I'm not drinking.

DAMIEN

Please come and sit on the bed, next to me. I have a lot to tell you.

CHARITY

Go ahead. I can hear you from here.

DAMIEN

But a passer-by might eavesdrop, Sister. You know that this block stands right on the highway, where Satan and his associates lurk with sinister intents. Ah! I forgot to shut the door.

[Leaves the bed to shut and bolt the door. Then pulls Charity, gently, to the bed. She resists but not for long. She increases the volume of the music]

CHARITY

Okay, here I am on the bed. Say what you have to tell me. I have to return to Peter's all the same; since I travel back to Kamnogo tomorrow. A brother at the Ministry has promised to inform me when my *avance de solde* is ready. And that won't be before three months, at the very earliest, given their snail pace.

DAMIEN

That is the more reason why we should spend the little time left together.

CHARITY

Doing what together?

DAMIEN

Isn't playing music enough? Sister, since you're closer to the switch, could you please turn off the light?

CHARITY

Why Damien? Why switch off the light?

DAMIEN

Don't you see how profusely I sweat? Don't you feel the heat? That bulb is a 100 Watts!

CHARITY

[*Switches off the lights*] Isn't it ridiculous to play religious music in the dark, Damien? [*Switches off the music*]

DAMIEN

It is very dark, isn't it?

CHARITY

It is, brother.

DAMIEN

[*Laughing luringly*] Not even Jesus would recognise Satan in darkness this thick.

CHARITY

Please brother, stop it! Don't do that Damien! What you're doing is sinful. Please ... please ... don't ... I beg ... stop it!

DAMIEN

Don't worry Sister; we're under cover of darkness. Don't be anxious. It will not be long ... I won't disappoint you. I swear, in God's name.

[CURTAIN]

ACT TWO SCENE I

It is evening in Peter's house two months later. Peter is discussing the Born Again Christians with Damien.

DAMIEN

Peter, did your sister make a breakthrough at the Ministry of Money before leaving for Kamnogo two months ago?

PETER

Charity, my cousin, you mean?

DAMIEN

Charity, your sister, is the one I mean.

PETER

Is that what she told you?

DAMIEN

Yes.

PETER

And you believed her?

DAMIEN

Of course.

PETER

Do you think me that crazy as to allow my own sister join a band of frustrated hypocrites?

DAMIEN

What do you mean?

PETER

Charity isn't my sister; she isn't even a first or second cousin, just a girl from the same village as I.

DAMIEN

Don't tell me!

PETER:

That is why she can afford to do as she pleases. I have no authority over her.

DAMIEN

I see.

PETER

Imagine that though her problem in the Ministry is as easy as losing a wallet in a crowded market, she stubbornly chooses the hard way. Under the diabolic influence of that satanic craze of theirs, she condemns *chop-I-chop*, and wouldn't let a goat eat where it is tethered; and so must wait and wait and wait until the chickens come home to roost, if ever they do, for her *avance de solde*.

DAMIEN

How unrealistic!

PETER

Only a dedicated fool like her would think that there is another way out. In three months her dossiers, to say the least, would still be where she left them a year ago.

DAMIEN

I agree.

PETER

In fact, she should thank her stars if the *functionaries* find something better with which to tie their *beignets* during lunch break.

DAMIEN

Or clean their shoes when it rains on their way to the office.

PETER

How naive!

DAMIEN

Do you know that she forced me to accompany her to their prayer sessions at the Ultimate Church of Christ, just before she returned to Kamnogo? That was precisely the day before she left.

PETER

Yes, I know. She returned very late in the night. I was suspicious and inquisitive, but she told me that the prayer session overstayed because converts like you had so many sins to confess. Tell me, how did you find it?

DAMIEN

I was overwhelmed. I saw whole families, couples, beautiful girls and handsome lads. The atmosphere was solemn. The conversions were profuse, but the confessions were curious. Everyone spoke as if possessed by a wild spirit.

PETER

Typical.

DAMIEN

They were extraordinarily bold and vulgar when condemning their past, Satan, kin, friends and the world outside.

PETER

What did you make of the preacher?

DAMIEN

The Pastor preaches better than any pastor I know. His American godfathers must be awfully proud of him. I nearly got converted myself; only bitter memories of tribulations as a student at the university numbed me.

PETER

That university of yours. Horrible place.

DAMIEN

Yes. You are familiar with my problems at that rotten seat of wisdom, aren't you?

PETER

[Nods with sympathy]

DAMIEN

So when I thought of the years I have spent there, shuffling from one faculty to the other with ever diminishing returns, I asked myself if God has been waiting for me to be born again before he can enable me pass an exam. I became very bitter and repulsed by their efforts at conversion. And I managed to slip out of the place unaffected by their attempts at emotional blackmail.

PETER

You did well to avoid conversion. You have succeeded where they've failed, and where many are going to fail.

DAMIEN

I don't understand.

PETER

These are people who don't take time to reflect, to cross-examine themselves and the world around them. They are governed by their emotions, not by reason. Hence their exaggerated sense of fear. They fear and blame others in their stead.

DAMIEN

Really?

PETER

Haven't you noticed the arrogance and prejudice of everyone who shakes hands with the Born Agains? Haven't you wondered why people supposedly closest to Christ and endowed with the Holy Spirit, should spend all their time judging, condemning and rejecting others as perfect candidates for hell? Yet they claim it's their divine mission to evangelize!

DAMIEN

Amazing! More like the Pharisees.

PETER

Yes, Luke 18:10-14. That's what they are, hypocrites.

DAMIEN

All of them?

PETER

Yes, all of them: hypocrites or victims of hypocrisy. Without exception they are either manipulating or being manipulated. As Christians, they have privileged emotion to reason in the face of life's dramas.

DAMIEN

If I understand you well, you are saying that those who join the Ultimate Church of Christ are people whose reaction to frustration or possible frustration is purely emotional.

PETER

That's it, that's what I mean!

DAMIEN

I think you have a point, judging from what I witnessed a couple of months ago. What I would add, however, is the aspect of spiritual manipulation by the Pastor. No one can convince me he doesn't hypnotise his followers; which is a most unethical thing to do even in God's name. He uses their fears, insecurities and despair to his advantage, while promising them a fantasy world which few know anything concrete about.

PETER

Spiritual manipulation?

DAMIEN

Yes.

PETER

I see. There's another curious aspect of these frustrated hypocrites.

DAMIEN

And that is...

PETER

The Pastor extorts 1/10 of each member's monthly earnings, saying that he does as the Bible bids, and telling them how much God loves the cheerful giver.

DAMIEN

Don't all churches?

PETER

In principle, but that isn't the problem. What I would like to know is if everything else he does is according to the Bible.

DAMIEN

I should think so.

PETER

Don't be deceived. For instance, I'd like to know if the Bible fans his brilliant ignorance of the problems of the needy poor. Does the Bible advocate that the Pastor earns more than the Church cleaner? Or that the Pastor be the only one to fly abroad for Born Again Dollars? He speaks against the rich, the corrupt and the worldly as if he weren't of the club. How many of his countrymen can ride a car, let alone be torn between a BMW, a Mercedes and a Pajero the way he does?

DAMIEN

How Worldly!

PETER

How oblivious of the Bible's verses! Heaven is for those to whom life on earth has been a hell. Happy are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

DAMIEN

Isn't it incredible how difficult it is to be good? I wouldn't have thought for a second he weren't the sparkle of water from the spring.

PETER

It's a business, Damien, like any other.

DAMIEN

Really? How?

PETER

The Pastor has turned God into a trickster that preys on innocence and naivety, and made of His church a safe haven for secular and sensuous pursuits by sinners with money enough to challenge His authority.

DAMIEN

Aren't those words too harsh?

PETER

Hardly harsh enough for someone who uses God as gateway to filthy self-enrichment. If ever I were to meet that dissembler, I would ask him just one question: Do you really want to succeed with my countrymen? And if he answered in the affirmative, I would advise him to strike off that clause about tithes. For the poor and impoverished, in their bulk, are simply stunted by misery, imposed by depleting vampires like him.

DAMIEN

They sang a very moving song during tithes and offerings. Something like "Give, Give, it will come back to you..."

PETER

A song specially composed by the Pastor to sink them further in misery.

DAMIEN

[*Getting ready to leave*] Interesting conversation, Peter. But I'd like to finish this topic later. I only stopped by briefly to find out if you can assist me in getting a job with the insurance firm for which you work.

PETER

Not easy at all, these days.

DAMIEN

I have a presentiment that my results at the faculty will still be catastrophic. So I want a break with false hope and to start job-hunting before it is too late.

PETER

I can't promise anything, but I will keep you informed of any vacancies.

DAMIEN

I count on you.

PETER

I'll do my best.

DAMIEN

Thanks a million. I must return to my place to prepare for the orals, in case I make it at the written.

PETER

Who knows?

DAMIEN

[Stands up] Maybe God can still smile on someone who turned down an invitation to be Born Again. He works in mysterious ways.

PETER

And so does the devil.

[They both laugh and Peter accompanies him to the door]

[CURTAIN]

ACT TWO SCENE II

It is evening. Damien is sitting in his room, pondering over a mystifying educational system. He has failed the examination again and has lost his place in the university.

DAMIEN

[He thinks himself alone, until he hears an all too familiar invisible Voice that has haunted and moralised him since childhood]

What good is a university where students work hard in vain? What good is a university where after four years one is no different from a fresher? What is in a university degree that the harder one toils the further away from it he gets? What good, just what good is there in being academically ambitious in a place like Nkwagh? I have endured the castigating French; employed diligence to supersede the regional, tribal and nepotism sentiments of wayward lecturers; hoped in vain to benefit from the spill-overs of sexually transmitted marks; exhibited supernatural patience with the mediocrity of their standards; and abstained from many forms of distraction. Yet my failures have only multiplied. My academic frustrations have matured and have in turn engendered a social misfit. The university has mystified academics and crippled my self-confidence. It has ... *[A loud, moralising, firm, slightly mocking voice interrupts]*

THE VOICE

Not entirely true, young man, not entirely true.

DAMIEN

What isn't true, you silly old bastard?

THE VOICE

No foul language, young man. Remember the girls? In all shapes and sizes?

DAMIEN

What about them?

THE VOICE

Remember how much time you spend sampling them like a butterfly?

DAMIEN

And so what?

THE VOICE

Time, young man. Time.

DAMIEN

Get lost!

THE VOICE

Not yet, young man, not yet. Remember the drugs, the booze, the...

DAMIEN

I block my ears!

THE VOICE

As the university has blocked its doors ... its doors ... its doors ... its doors ... [The voice grows fainter and fainter until it disappears]

DAMIEN

Shit!

[There is a knock at the door. He opens it and expresses surprise on seeing Charity]

DAMIEN

Ah! Ah! Charity! You're back? Is anything the matter? I don't think it is three months yet, is it?

CHARITY

Let me in, will you? You looked for it didn't you? Now that it has happened, start telling me what you plan to do. *[Sits down and Damien sits by her after bolting the door]* Yes, I am listening. *[She turns and faces Damien boldly]*

DAMIEN

[Embarrassed] I don't understand you. I don't know what you are talking about. What are you driving at, sister?

CHARITY

Stop that! So you knew I was a sister? Yet you went ahead and did it!

DAMIEN

Did what Charity?

CHARITY

You impregnated me! You have offended God, you sinner!
The devil dwells in you!

DAMIEN

So?

CHARITY

So what? Tell me what to do. Tell me your plans fast! I
have just stolen time to be here, so be fast!

DAMIEN

No dispute has ever been settled in a marketplace, nor does
one shake hands with a clinched fist. It is not by screams
and wails that fellow Born Agains have succeeded in
pocketing the gullible of our times. Neither is it through
doing what you are doing at the moment that your Pastor
has come by his riches. So be calm and tell me what you
want, else...

CHARITY

I have told you that I'm pregnant. What else?

DAMIEN

So I should get up and start dancing? Or should I pull out
my hair and eat because sister Charity is pregnant? Tell me
what you want or get lost!

CHARITY

Don't just try to get angry with me; don't let me recall all
the harm you have done to my faith and me!

DAMIEN

Faith indeed! Tell me what you want us to do Charity, and be fast!

CHARITY

I just came to see you. I haven't yet thought of what to do.

DAMIEN

Then let me tell you. Be ready for an abortion tomorrow night. I have a friend who will take care of that.

THE VOICE

[Which only Damien hears] Abor-t-i-o-n? You again? Watch out, young man, watch out.

DAMIEN

[To The Voice] Get lost!

THE VOICE

[Before dying out] Don't say I never warned you, young man.

CHARITY

[Stunned] What! Aren't we getting married?

DAMIEN

Getting maaa- what?

CHARITY

Married, of course! You told me that you love me, didn't you?

DAMIEN

Suppose I did. Does that mean marriage? What would we eat? Stones? Marriage isn't as easy as some of you girls seem to think!

CHARITY

I'm working. We can patch up with the little I earn as a Village Extension Worker, while praying to God to secure a job for you.

DAMIEN

Forget God. I'm not getting married without a job. A woman will never feed me!

CHARITY

Why? Damien why?

DAMIEN

My father never was, why should I?

CHARITY

[Starts to weep and to curse] You have ruined me Damien. You have destroyed my faith and me. What a shame! What a disgrace! You deceived me that you're born again. Now see what has happened; hear the kind of things you say! Oh! I'm dead. Lord God, Christ my Saviour, deliver me from the hands of this devil!

DAMIEN

No use weeping Charity. Doing that is like singing a funeral song; for, no matter how much the mourner sings,

the dead can never live again. At least not here on earth. Instead, I would advise you prepare yourself for tomorrow's *D-&-C*. Meanwhile, I'll go straightaway to make an appointment with my medical friend.

CHARITY

I'm not killing the innocent child!

DAMIEN

But you've killed many innocent children before. You confessed so yourself at the evangelisation meeting! Don't you remember any longer?

CHARITY

That was long ago, and I have regretted everything. Today, thank God I'm born again; I'm saved. I dwell in the Lord and He in me.

DAMIEN

I want to hear no more of that gibberish! Get yourself ready for tomorrow!

CHARITY

I've told you that I'm not ready to kill an innocent child. You must get married to me. Why do you want to abandon me at my time of need?

DAMIEN

Does Peter know about the pregnancy?

CHARITY

Of course, I've told him.

DAMIEN

[*Worried*] What did he say?

CHARITY

That it is entirely our lookout.

DAMIEN

Why did you tell him? Can't you keep your big trap shut? Prepare yourself for tomorrow! [*Leaves the room, angry*]

CHARITY

[*Alone*] Oh! I feel so weak; I feel like I am about to die. I must pray for strength and courage. [*Murmurs a prayer*] Dear Christ my Saviour, I have sinned and come short of thy glory. I believe that you died on the cross to save me from my transgressions. Forgive me my sins and guide and guard me through life's ordeals. I promise never again to fall prey to men. Kindly forgive me Lord, for the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Thank you for hearing my request and for responding to it with promptitude. I remain your faithful servant here on earth. Amen.

[*Lies down in bed, switches off the lights and starts to sob afresh*].

[CURTAIN]

ACT TWO SCENE III

It is past midnight. The Pastor is in bed sleeping. From time to time he cries and talks out in his sleep.

PASTOR

Nooooooo!... Nooooooooooooo! ...

PASTOR

Help! ... Help! ... Help! ...

PASTOR

Please! ... Please! ... Please! ...

PASTOR

Don't let me fall! ... Nooooooooooo!

PASTOR

Hold meeeeeee! Snakes! ... Snakes!... Scorpionnnnnns!

PASTOR

I've done nothing wrong...

PASTOR

My hands are clean...

PASTOR

Go away ...

PASTOR

Leave me alone ...

PASTOR

Nooo! ... I'm not thirsty ...

PASTOR

Take the blood away...

PASTOR

Don't let the dog loose...

PASTOR

Noooooooooooooooooooooo! ... Snakes! ... Scorpions! ... Stones!... My head! ... I'm deeeeeeeead!

[wakes with a start, sweating profusely and shaking like a reed in a river. He rushes to the mirror holding his head like someone bleeding, but doesn't see any wound]

PASTOR

Thank God I'm not bleeding ... What a nightmare...

PASTOR

That young man dripping blood and full of hate ... what did he say his name was? ... *(Tries hard to remember but fails)*

PASTOR

The air is heavy. *[Sighs]* The devil lurks in our midst. I feel its coarse hands at work.

[He sits on the bed for a while, his head in his hands, deep in thought. Finally, murmuring inaudible words of prayer, he gets back into bed, dejected]

[CURTAIN]

ACT TWO SCENE IV

It is at night. Damien and Paul, a senior medical student, are together in the latter's room. Charity's corpse is on the bed, covered with a blanket.

DAMIEN

[Downcast] How did it happen Paul? How did you do it?

PAUL

[Sobbing] Please Damien, try to understand me. I have told you that it was a technical fault. I mistakenly, most mistakenly scraped the wrong area.

DAMIEN

But you are a senior medical student, aren't you? How can you account for such an error? A fifth year student who doesn't know how to use a pair of forceps? You are a disgrace to your profession! Doctor my head. To hell with a buffoon like you!

PAUL

Believe me Damien. It wasn't really completely my fault. She tried to resist when I was about to scrape. And desperate not to disappoint you, I became nervous and reckless with the curette. And before I knew it, the damage was done and she was all blood. If you had been here, we could have rushed her to the hospital. But without you, I found it impossible to carry her alone. You see, she is so bulky and heavy.

DAMIEN

I can't believe that Paul. I can't! You have killed Charity!

PAUL

[*Still sobbing*] Don't blame me please. Why can't you believe the words of a friend?

DAMIEN

What do we do now?

PAUL

What else but tell the Police the truth?

DAMIEN

You're mad Paul, quite mad! Do you want to face the firing squad?

PAUL

[*Surprised*] Is that? I didn't know that the authorities are that severe! What can we do then? Throw her into the lake?

DAMIEN

Impossible! Peter, her cousin, knows of the whole affair, and wouldn't rest until she is found. Moreover, the increasing number of suicides at the lake has forced the City Council to employ security guards to patrol the whole area.

PAUL

What do we do then?

DAMIEN

We have no choice but to lock her up in your room and escape to Limbuh.

PAUL

What! Limbuh? What will become of my fiancée? My studies? My career? My future? My parents?

DAMIEN

Fiancée my foot! What studies? What career? What future? Are you not ashamed of yourself? Incompetent fool! To hell with such concerns. Where's your sense of priorities? Would you rather sell your life to buy a career and a future, which you don't deserve in the first place? No, fool! A desperate situation calls for desperate measures!

PAUL

Do you really think that telling the Police is such an unwise thing to do? I would rather do it than abandon my studies and drown my future! I am not going to Limbuh!

DAMIEN

[*Sweating*] Do you realise the implications? Do you realise that any silly decision of yours would limit my chances of successful escape? Do you realise the truth would send the Police after me? No, Paul, to fail to become an incompetent doctor is not the end of life. I for one have just been thrown out of the University, but life continues; life must go on. Come with me to Limbuh, save your life by saving mine!

PAUL

[Sobbing even more] But why did you bring her to me? Why did you not go to the hospital? Why did you even have to do that to her? Tell me why Damien? Why did you get mixed up with a Born Again Christian in the first place? See the way I'm being made to pay dearly for a debt I didn't incur. What will my parents say? What will my fiancée think? How will my friends see it? And my professors of all people; what will they think of their darling Paul? Oh! Oh! I'm dead! Lord God, help me out of this mess.

DAMIEN

[With callous indifference] No use shedding tears over spilt milk Paul. For God's sake, let's go!

[Pulls a reluctant Paul out of the room, locks the door after him and flings the key down into the darkness]

[CURTAIN]

ACT TWO SCENE V

It is afternoon. Members of the Ultimate Church of Christ are assembled as usual, but their Pastor isn't one of them. They are just from burying Charity, whose rotting corpse was discovered by Paul's neighbours and the Police alerted. In place of the Pastor, an Elder is standing behind a pulpit on which hangs a giant wooden Cross. He directs the proceedings. Peter slips in and sits somewhere at the back, as the Elder begins to speak.

ELDER

We are back from the cemetery for the homeless and the forgotten. There we went to lay to rest our sister whom we know was simply trying to be good in a world pregnant with vice. She couldn't make it to Calvary, but we know she tried.

CHORUS

What is important are lessons learnt.

ELDER

She died in the hungry claws of a friendly devil, and was abandoned to her fate by someone in whom she trusted.

CHORUS

What is important are lessons learnt.

ELDER

People come and people go. Some are buried in pomp and glory; some in coffins and graves marked with status and wealth. Others are preyed upon by birds and beasts; others left to rot unattended; and others buried with reluctance in mass graves dug in a hurry by the lords of war and strife. But the Lord we know cherishes neither the dwarfing of some among the living nor the display of difference in the dead.

CHORUS

What is important are lessons learnt.

ELDER

Our Pastor has vanished into thin air. The grapevine says he's left for greener pastures. The message we sent him on learning of Charity's death was returned to us with these words: *'Sorry, I've got a plane to catch'*.

CHORUS

What is important are lessons learnt.

ELDER

Whom to turn to for pastorship? How to detect the wolves in sheepskin? How to avoid the holy devils with tongues of honey? What to do to keep hope alive?

CHORUS

[*Prayerfully, Bibles opened to Psalm 23*]

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me
beside the still waters.*

*He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of
righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy
rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine
enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup
runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of
my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever. [KJV]*

*[Peter, visibly moved, stands up and
asks to be allowed to speak]*

ELDER

What is your name brother?

PETER

Peter

ELDER

The Rock!

CHORUS

Alleluia! Jesus is great!

ELDER

Praise the Lord!

CHORUS

Amen!

ELDER

Come forward brother.

[Peter moves up to the front where the Elder is]

ELDER

What would you like to share with us brother?

PETER

A confession

ELDER

Praise the Lord!

CHORUS

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find;
knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

ELDER

For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh
findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

CHORUS

Amen!

ELDER

Your story Peter.

PETER

I overflow with gratitude for your great deeds to my late cousin, Charity. Before I could make it to the mortuary following the radio announcement on the discovery of her corpse, you had already claimed her for burial. I was touched by your solidarity, and have come here to thank you.

CHORUS

Praise the Lord!

PETER

[*With tears in his eyes*] In the past I have judged and condemned you from the safe distance of ignorance and prejudice; hardly giving myself the chance to see what your reality was, or what we could have in common. But I thank God for pulling me your way this afternoon.

CHORUS

Praise the Lord!

PETER

Let's thank the God of small people: the God of the mad, and the blind and the handicapped; the God of the suffering and the exploited; the God of the ignored and the forgotten. Let's thank Him for being there.

CHORUS

Alleluia. Praise the Lord!

PETER

[*still in tears*] I ask for your prayers and forgiveness. Bring me home from darkness, dear brothers and sisters. And let me share in the warmth of belonging in earnest.

ELDER

Praise the Lord!

CHORUS

Amen!

ELDER

Let's thank God for Peter; let's praise Him for hope; let's sing and dance and pray all night long. Let's get wild with joy.

CHORUS

(*Sing*) There is life and joy over there... Over there... There is life and joy over there... Over there... There is life and joy over there... Over there... Over there ... Over there.

[THE END]

“This play tackles the theatrically attractive but ethically complex issue of Christian fundamentalism. Nyamnjoh, as a sociologist is well qualified to explore the social problems and psychological pressures which give rise to the born-again phenomenon, and the strong appeal of fundamentalist religion. *The Convert*, however is no schematic sociological tract. It deals with the conflicting imperatives in 21st century West Africa, which push ordinary people into extraordinary situations, and provides no easy solutions to the issues raised.

Although the play revolves around the Ultimate Church of Christ and the four main characters affected by it, the audience is given a deftly sketched picture of a corrupt world beyond it, lacking in spiritual or community values. [...] The characterization... is remarkable for its avoidance of any obvious protagonist; the audience is allowed no clear character with whom to identify. The four main characters ... have both virtues and flaws, each providing insights into ways the consumer-oriented materialism of modern life impacts upon African spirituality and community values.”

- David Kerr, Professor in Literature and Drama
University of Botswana

“At the core of the implicit philosophy in Nyamnjoh’s *The Convert* ... is the theatrical manifesto that contemporary society has not only to liberate itself, and its productive powers from ‘Pentecostal’, freak religions and distortion, it also has to liberate these same productive capacities from their present prostration. There is a deep, engaging humanism that pervades *The Convert*, but it is a humanism emblematic, to speak analogously, of the Aeschylean variety.”

- Bate Besong, Africa Review of Books.

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Francis B. Nyamnjoh is Associate Professor and Head of Publications and Dissemination with the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). He has published two other novels, *The Dissillusioned African* (1995) and *A Nose for Money* (2006). His latest creative work is the book of short stories for young adults, *Stories from Abakwa* (2007).



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